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ABSTRACT

The social councils in East German universities are examined in this conference paper. Within the authoritarian structure of East German society, there is not much need for universities to worry about social accountability. They are prevented from straying too far into pure scholarship by ministers who remind them of their duties to the state and the current economic plan. The Ministry of Higher and Technical Education in Berlin appoints the faculty, creates departments, sanctions research, and issues detailed curricula and course book lists for every subject taught, which must be adhered to strictly across the nation. (Author/LBH)

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The Social Councils in the Universities of East Germany: An Exercise in Democratic Centralism.

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Within the authoritarian structure of East German society, there is not all that much need for universities to worry about social accountability. They are prevented from straying too far into the Elysian fields of pure scholarship by a guiding ministerial hand, which is ever present to remind them of their duties to the state and, more particularly, to the current economic plan. The Ministry of Higher and Technical Education in Berlin appoints the faculty, creates departments, sanctions research and issues detailed curricula and course book lists for every subject taught, which must be strictly adhered to across the nation.

Universities are, then, very much accountable to the state, but one would imagine that society at large would not be very involved in university affairs. However, the German Democratic Republic, like other communist states, is ostensibly run according to the principles of Lenin's concept of "democratic centralism". This means that control is centralised but a rather wider power base is set up within the agencies that are being led. It is also known as "the principle of individual leadership and collective consultation." Decisions, and the responsibility for them, are taken by one man, but he bases these to a greater or lesser extent on the recommendations he receives from advisory councils. In some areas of communist society, these assemblies do have a fairly effective say, but even where they are little more than voices in the wilderness, they still fulfil a doubly useful function. On the one hand, they are for the real leaders a valuable gauge of popular sentiment or informed opinion, upon which they can often, and wisely so, build their administrative policies. On the other hand, they provide a safety-valve mechanism whereby the constituents may give vent to any strong feelings or frustrations which the denial of actual decision-making powers might engender in them.

It is along these lines that the universities of the German Democratic Republic are run. "Individual leadership" takes the form of a strong rector, who is directly responsible not to any senate, but to the Minister of Higher Education. It is officially he alone, though assisted by a number of prorectors, who governs the university. Similarly, the head of a department derives his formally wide power not from the departmental faculty, but from the rector. There is, then, a straightforward chain of command from minister to rector down to department head.

We may, however, speak of social accountability in describing the role of a rather important advisory committee attached to each university, namely the so-called Social Council. This has its origin in similar assemblies which arose in 1966 around the Associations of State-Owned Enterprises, the control boards which supervised groups of similar industries in a particular region. Two years later, Walter Ulbricht, the East German Party chief, announced that they would be set up in the universities, too. We might in broad terms speak of the Social Council as the social conscience of the university. It "provides a means by which...local society may be associated with the government of the university." That is how Moodie & Eustace describe the English university court, and indeed there are similarities between these two bodies. Their description of English court membership would (apart from the mention of church representation) fit the East German Social Council as well : local notables, local government nominees, representatives of various local bodies and professional organizations, representatives of trades unions, of students, faculty and non-academic staff.

The composition and terms of reference of the Social Council were set down in a decree from the Ministry of Higher Education

on 1 August 1969. Its size is limited to fifty members, of whom some are elected and some appointed. Those representatives who are members of the university are elected by their peers. The other, non-university members are proposed by the rector, at the suggestion of the various Party, state and trades union organizations and local industry, and formally appointed by the Minister of Higher Education. Ex officio membership is enjoyed by the rector, the prorectors and the university officers of the ruling Socialist Unity Party, the Free German Youth movement, and the Trades Union Federation. However, the watchdog nature of this body is aided by the ineligibility of the rector, prorectors or any heads of department to become chairman or vice-chairman of the council. In point of fact, Rostock University, for example, has developed an unwritten rule of always electing a non-university member to the chairmanship.

This stipulation of ineligibilty was probably made to correct an imbalance, during the experimental stage of these councils, in favour of the university. At the Magdeburg Technical University in 1968, for example, there were only thirteen external representatives against twenty-six university members. There has subsequently been a trend towards weighting the council more heavily on the other side. The Social Council at Berlin's Humboldt University had the following profile in 1971 :

19 non-university members, of whom there were :
- 2 Party representatives
- 5 representatives from state organizations
- 8 representatives from organizations with which the university had research contracts
- 3 delegates from the Schools Adminstration
- 1 Free German Youth representative

16 members of the university, including :
- The rector and 2 prorectors
- 3 leaders of university political groups (Party, Youth Movement and Trades Union)
- 4 professors
- 3 students
- 3 non-academic staff.

On a rather larger Social Council of fifty members, at the Karl-Marx University in Leipzig in 1972/3, there were eight professors and four students.

There is, then, today usually a predominantly lay membership of this body, whose task it is to ensure that the university fulfils its obligations to society and the state. Let us look a little more closely at its terms of reference and the extent of its authority. It is of course primarily the Academic Council (the successor of the former senate) which makes recommendations to the rector on research projects and the like, but we also find given as the first function of the Social Council the broad oversight over research in the university. Its job is to see that research does slant in a particular direction which makes the best use of the resources to which the university has access, both in terms of physical plant and even more so geographically, in relation to the surrounding industrial environment. For example, one could imagine that the Jena Social Council would want to ensure, in this city of the Zeiss glass works, that the university did not neglect its research in optics unduly, for the sake of, say, Old Icelandic poetry. The council also has a brief to examine research projects for their rational and efficient use of resources and funds, and to help develop the mutual ties between the university and local industry. This last point is perhaps the nub of the matter. Most of its tasks of oversight are probably redundant in the light of the careful planning of the Academic Council. In this respect, it acts rather like an upper chamber, a House of Lords, and does as such serve a function of some usefulness. However, the main raison d'être of the Social Council must be seen in building bridges, in attempting to involve the community in the life and actions of the university, and vice versa.

The importance of this can be seen in the fact that almost all research at East German universities (some 80%) is financed not directly by the state through university funds, but by local industry and enterprises. So the involvement of the latter, an effort to make them feel that they are a part of the life of the university, and that the university is part of their community, can do nothing but good in the securing of research contracts.. It is not that there is much competition against the university to win contracts for research which industry wishes to be undertaken. Rather, this is important in the opposite case, which is perhaps more frequent, when a department wants to initiate some research and is seeking a sponsor. This is much easier in the atmosphere of partnership which the Social Council can build up.

The council is formally given extensive powers. Not only does it make recommendations to the rector, in practice of an almost mandatory nature, but it has the right to demand reports from him on questions of finance and planning. It may also require outside bodies which are contractual partners of the university to report to it on their collaboration. If the council perceives any difficulties in the work of the university, or presumably if there is some hindrance to the implementation of its recommendations to the rector, then it may turn directly to the Minister of Higher Education.

It appears, however, that the main thrust of the Social Council's work is not with specifics, but with the broad framework of teaching and research. Not that it does not deal with specialised matters. Indeed, at the University of Rostock, the council members have made it a practice to sit in on classes, and to hold discussions with tudents and faculty at the department level. In doing this, it seems to be going out to look for

problems, rather than dealing with matters which come to it. At Magieburg, the deliberations of the Social Council resulted in recommendations such as these :

1) Research contracts with outside bodies should include specifications for closer co-operation with regard to the responsibilities of both sides for further education;

2) Collaboration should be intensified in the promotion of cultural activities in the town;

3) The mayor should be requested to take steps to improve local library facilities.

These are rather vague suggestions. The council seems to have been hard put to find a focus for its attention. And indeed some sense of frustration does appear in the council, one member of which writes :

> The specialised basic questions to be handled and considered by the subcommittees should be framed in a better, more concrete way than before. The problems must not be too broadly conceived, as has been partly the case in the past, for in this way the danger arises that the individual questions are not treated concretely enough, and the recommendations to the rector become too global and general.

Yet the whole idea behind the Social Council was that it should be free from the foggy minutiae of decision-making, in order that the air should be clear for a wide-ranging discussion on objectives and their fulfilment in the communist framework. Were the broad policy directives of the Party being applied to teaching and research ? Was sufficient emphasis being placed throughout the curriculum on the political education of the students ? Was enough being done to promote the image of the university in the town ? And so on.

In the last resort, of course, these questions would have to be referred to the departments. But the problem with departmental meetings just about anywhere in the world (or with university senates, for that matter) is that there is simply no time for broad and general

discussion. In this respect, the Social Council is a quite excellent idea. The frustration within it, however, derives from the fact that the council, although endowed with considerable powers of investigation, is given nothing to investigate. Everything necessary for the running of the university is accomplished elsewhere. Rather like the East German parliament, the People's Chamber, it has nothing to do. And the lay members, the outsiders, must frequently have difficulty in formulating the council's tasks de novo, in pinpointing exacly where the internal problems of the university lie. Under these cirmcumstances, it is, as so often, the Party representatives who determine and dominate the proceedings. Rostock stresses how poorly briefed are many of its members in comparison with the vociferous representatives of the Free German Youth. It is hardly surprising, then, that there is a call to put "into the foreground clear problems which have to be solved rather than lengthy and not especially constructive reports."

In conclusion, the machinery to ensure the accountability of the East German university is well defined, as one would expect in a communist society. It is in need of a little refinement, which requires a modification of spirit rather than letter . If the Academic Council or the departments were to approach the Social Council now and then with problems and tasks which it requested the latter to take up, the members of the Social Council would undoubtedly feel that they were making a more positive contribution to the life of the university, rather than remaining a police force with a few clues, but with no crimes reported to it. If the rector were to show rather more often and more clearly that he was taking advantage of the varied expertise and impartiality of the Social Council to guide him in his decisions, then its members would feel much more useful, and the appearance of an oligarchical centralism would be dispelled in favour of the image of democratic centralism through which East German society professes to operate.

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